DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 869 PS 029 091

AUTHOR Watson, Sara; Squires, Barbara; Schafer, Peter
TITLE Think Global, Document Local: Using Data and Information Technologies To Move the Early Childhood Agenda. Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children.
INSTITUTION Finance Project, Washington, DC.; Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY.
PUB DATE 2000-05-00
NOTE 21p.; For related Starting Points documents, see PS 028 922 and PS 029 090-095.
AVAILABLE FROM Rings Leighton Fulfillment, 1440 N Street NW, Suite A-1, Washington, DC 20005-2814. Tel: 202-319-2951; Fax: 202-319-2955; Web site: http://www.financeproject.org ($10, plus $6 shipping. Prepaid orders only).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *Child Advocacy; Cost Effectiveness; *Data Collection; Day Care; *Early Childhood Education; Information Dissemination; *Information Technology; Public Opinion; Public Policy; *Public Support; Young Children

ABSTRACT

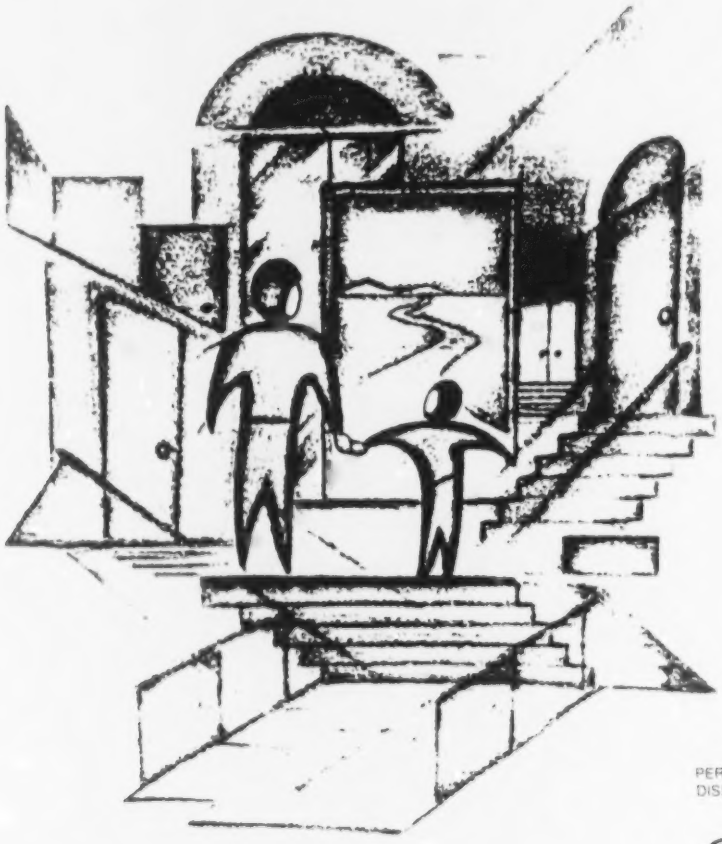
Child advocacy groups have become increasingly sophisticated about using data to mobilize public opinion and motivate greater public investment in young children and their families. The lesson emerging from this work is that state and local data are needed in addition to national data to build a more powerful case for change. This policy brief describes data and information technologies used by children's initiatives in specific localities and states across the nation. Part 1 of the brief describes the challenges involved in building a capacity for data collection at the state, regional, and local level. Part 2 describes initiatives which have used 4 strategies for enlisting data and information technologies to mobilize public support for improving early care and education: (1) coordinating data gathering and child advocacy efforts; (2) providing "just-in-time" data by just the right messenger; (3) creating multi-media campaigns to capture the public's attention; and (4) using cost-benefit analysis to demonstrate the value of investing in early childhood. Part 3 illustrates 6 data and information technologies to improve the planning and delivery of services: (1) focusing on results for children and families; (2) connecting and empowering people at the front line; (3) using distance learning to spread the word and bridge the gap; (4) creating and using cost-accounting/decision-support software; (5) using intermediaries to improve data collection and streamline administration; and (6) sharing data among agencies. Part 4 discusses issues that the early childhood field will face as it moves into the future. (KB)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 448 869

Think Global, Document Local: Using Data and Information Technologies to Move the Early Childhood Agenda



PS 029091

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C. D. Hayes
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Starting Points 1

Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children

CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK | THE FINANCE PROJECT

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Think Global, Document Local: Using Data and Information Technologies to Move the Early Childhood Agenda

BY SARA WATSON, BARBARA SQUIRES AND PETER SCHAFER

Introduction

Today, the early childhood field is coming to terms with a reality that the private sector has long grasped: efforts to shape public opinion or market an idea succeed best when they are informed by solid, relevant data. At the national level, the collection and analysis of data on children's issues has become much more sophisticated over the last decade. The number and type of indicators of child well-being have grown tremendously, along with data on those indicators. A wide variety of organizations and initiatives, funded by the public and private sector, have contributed to this growth, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count initiative, organizations such as Child Trends, and federal initiatives such as the State Child Indicators Project.

In 1994, the publication of *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children* by Carnegie Corporation of New York heralded a "quiet crisis" for our nation's youngest children. Today, the crisis is no longer quite so quiet. The 11 states and cities that are part of the Starting Points State and Community Partnerships are part of a growing chorus focused on improving the lives of young children and their families. This brief is one of a set of products sharing the experiences of Starting Points sites, as well as other states and localities, to help the nation move towards a healthy, nurturing beginning for all its children.

At the same time, children's advocacy groups have become more sophisticated about using these data to mobilize public opinion and motivate greater public investment in young children and their families. They have begun to make strategic use of information technologies and internet sites to collect, access and share data. Leaders of early childhood initiatives have used these data not only for public information purposes, but also to manage services and supports more effectively. In some cases, they have begun to apply private sector cost-benefit techniques to early childhood investments. These changes reflect broad new strategic thinking about how better to serve customers and improve results.

A key lesson that emerged from this work is that national data are essential but not sufficient. To build a powerful case for change at the state and local levels, political leaders and their constituents need to have a nuanced picture of the needs and strengths of their children and families; they need insight into the contextual issues which frame that picture. The watchword of today's advocates might be, "Think global, document local."

This policy brief describes the use of data and information technologies by children's initiatives in specific localities and states across the nation, stretching from Rhode Island to Hawaii. It emphasizes, but is not limited to, Starting Points sites. Part 1 describes the difficult challenges involved in building a capacity for data collection at the state, regional and local level. Part 2 describes initiatives which have used data and information technologies (IT) to mobilize public support for improving early care and education. Part 3 illustrates the use of data and IT to improve the planning and delivery of services. Part 4 discusses issues that the early childhood field will face as it moves into the future.

1. Challenges in Moving Into the Information Age

Behind the great progress that early childhood organizations and advocates have made lies a decades-long history of struggle and hard work. While the business world rapidly came to accept the need for up-to-the minute numbers and importance of tight information connections among divisions and between headquarters and the front line, public-sector organizations have faced an uphill battle. Virtually all public agency databases were designed to operate in isolation, never to be integrated with those from other agencies. Databases were designed to collect measures of activity, rather than results. Data collection was typically one-way, with information feeding to headquarters, not the other way around. With little demand for real-time data, long lag times from data input to analysis were routine. There was (and still is) enormous suspicion about allowing governments to collect significant amounts of data on individuals. Finally most public information systems had to be built in the most parsimonious way possible, as dollars spent on collecting data and building information systems were seen as money diverted away from programs, rather than money that would enhance programs.

Overview: Ten Strategies for Using Data and Information Technologies to Move the Early Childhood Agenda

Mobilizing Public Support for Better Early Care and Education

1. Coordinating data gathering and child advocacy efforts.
2. Providing "just-in-time" data, by just the right messenger.
3. Creating multi-media campaigns that capture the public's attention.
4. Using cost-benefit analysis to demonstrate the value of investing in early childhood.

Managing for Better Results

1. Focusing on results for children and families.
2. Connecting and empowering people at the front line.
3. Using distance learning to spread the word and bridge the gap.
4. Creating and using cost-accounting/ decision-support software.
5. Using intermediaries to improve data collection and streamline administration.
6. Sharing data among agencies.

But the past decade has seen enormous changes in this landscape. With the increasing demand for rapid feedback on how children and families are faring, as well as the growing acceptance and falling prices of technology, state and local agencies have been able to develop faster and better information systems that can inform decisionmaking and help them run more effective services and supports for children and families.

2. Mobilizing Public Support for Better Early Care and Education

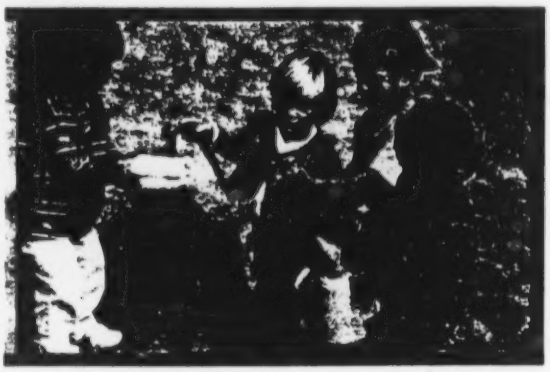
Businesses have traditionally used a powerful combination of quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate the worth of their products. Taking the same tack, early childhood leaders are now using a variety of methods to showcase the importance of investing in the early years.

COORDINATING DATA GATHERING AND CHILD ADVOCACY EFFORTS

Many states and communities are forging closer linkages between those who collect data on the status of children, and those who use the data to educate public and private decisionmakers. Data partnerships among advocates, universities and policymakers can be especially powerful. If implemented carefully, this strategy can benefit both policymakers and children's advocates. First, it gives policymakers the information they need to make good, research-based decisions. Especially in family and children's services, new policies are sometimes based on isolated, dramatic events, rather than systematic analysis of data over time. While public officials will always need to respond to public interest, having data that show the broader picture can often forestall hasty decisions reacting to atypical events. Second, closer linkages between research and advocacy helps advocates generate or sustain support for data collection and analysis. It demonstrates the value of the data, and gives a rationale for data collection that can counter concerns about confidentiality.

One lesson learned from these experiences is that both researchers and advocates need to protect the objectivity of the data to ensure that they are accepted by policymakers across the political spectrum. Another is the need to encourage academic researchers to apply their talents to policy analyses aimed at helping public officials make more informed decisions.

- **Rhode Island** Kids Count has collaborated closely with advocates inside and outside government. Their data books are widely regarded as providing objective information on the status of children and their families in Rhode Island. Rhode Island Kids Count staff have created a three-way relationship that has helped to heighten their effective use of data to encourage policy change. When Kids Count staff see an emerging issue, they start to collect data relevant to that issue. They then begin to work with public agency staff to infuse the data into the debate over a particular policy proposal. As the proposal starts to gain momentum, Kids Count uses its extensive media contacts to interest the press in this combination of facts and potential policy changes. The press attention then helps move the agenda forward. This symbiotic relationship helps ensure that policymakers have the data to make more informed decisions, and that that the media provide fact-based coverage to better educate the public.



- The **North Carolina** Partnership for Children (NCPC), which supports Smart Start, collaborates with an academic center, the National Center for Early Learning and Development (NCELD) at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, to develop and distribute briefs that translate policy research into information useable for policymakers. NCELD prepares the information to go into

the briefs, with NCPC staff and others advising them on language and content that will be useful for policymakers. This relationship again helps not only policymakers but also NCPC and NCELD. Having research-based, well-written data analyses helps Smart Start's work by giving policymakers another objective source of information about children and families. And in turn, seeing policymakers use the information helps NCELD increase the support within the academic community for its practitioner-oriented research.

- **Hawaii's** Good Beginnings Alliance has collaborated with other advocacy organizations to provide a unified data picture to state legislators. Sixteen children's organizations formed a coalition to develop a data notebook for legislators during the 2000 session. Each week of the legislative session, one of these organizations prepared a short data brief on a particular issue relating to the overall outcome of "children healthy, safe and ready to succeed," and hand-delivered it to each legislator. The Good Beginnings Alliance gave each legislator's office an overall summary on the status of children and a notebook to hold the data briefs. This approach not only gives diverse organizations a common framework for addressing trends and issues, but also allows a wide range of voices to address legislators and take part in the deliberative process.
- **Hawaii** Kids Watch also publishes a comprehensive Children's Budget Analysis Data Book, which provides data to address a variety of questions: how much is Hawaii investing in children, who pays for children's programs, which programs receive the funds, how much is spent for each program category, are state agencies focusing on children, does spending reach children, who delivers the services, and what are the purposes for spending on children and youth. The data book covers federal, state, county and private spending and is

intended to be used in educating the public and in planning for Hawaii's children.

- **Florida** has established a close working relationship between the Center for Florida's Children, which publishes the Kids Count data books, and the Florida Children's Campaign, a coalition of organizations advocating for children's issues. A variety of public policy initiatives, including the recent legislation creating a state-wide network of School Readiness Councils, have relied on the data book as the definitive baseline for children and family status. In addition, the Florida Children's Campaign developed conversation guides on school readiness and quality child care and after school care. These guides, sent to two thousand businesspeople, civic leaders and legislative candidates in Florida, used data to educate them on key early childhood issues.
- In **Boston**, Project EQUIP (Early Education Quality Improvement Project) worked with the Boston 0-8 Coalition to provide data on child care access and quality in nine neighborhood clusters. By documenting the gap between the demand for and supply of quality child care, these advocates galvanized neighborhood residents to come together and submit a successful proposal for state Community Partnership for Children funds to improve and expand child care. City leaders also used the data to make informed decisions about

how to allocate the new funds among the clusters. Having concrete data helped give an objective basis to discussions among the different clusters and helped them work together more efficiently. In addition, the data helped early childhood leaders from the city and state join forces for their first joint request for proposals to fund local child care slots and coordination activities.

PROVIDING "JUST-IN-TIME" DATA, BY JUST THE RIGHT MESSENGER

Leaders of early childhood initiatives have not only produced regular reports on the status of children, but they have also looked for specific windows of opportunity to provide targeted, timely data at crucial points in policy negotiations. This kind of timely response helps policymakers base decisions on demonstrable need, rather than on anecdotes or events that may be atypical. The ability to be flexible, present the big picture, and respond to policymakers' needs also builds credibility for the early childhood community.

A number of lessons have surfaced from this experience. First, the more pointed the data, the sharper it can cut. As Elizabeth Burke Bryant of Rhode Island notes, when using powerful data to illustrate a problem, it is important to avoid creating a "blame game" in which people feel defensive and are less likely to contribute to a problem-solving atmosphere. Advocates will be most effective if they present and use data as a tool for joint efforts to improve service delivery, rather than as a way to "catch" poor performance.

Second, both the message and messenger are important. Data need to fit the situation, and they need to come from an organization that is trusted to provide reliable information. The ability to know which data are needed, and to be or select the best messenger, is borne out of years of painstaking work. Like the "overnight" acting sensation who labored for years in local theater, children's advocates who are successful at this strategy have spent years building databases, reputations and relationships.

- The director of **Vermont's** Agency for Human Services, Con Hogan, used up-to-date and targeted local analyses of children and family conditions in legislative hearings. At the beginning of his testimony, he would congratulate each committee member on areas where his or her district was performing well, while gently noting where there was still work to be done. Legislators appreciated the specific information about their own communities and recognized the value of the data for tracking trends in their own districts.
- In **San Francisco**, Starting Points staffed the child care subcommittee of the Mayor's welfare reform task force. One of the major tasks was working with the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network to quickly assemble data on the number of families leaving welfare who would need child care, the types of care needed, and the supply of good quality care. The analysis showed such a stark contrast between what existed and what was needed that the city council allocated $2 million in FY 1998 to increase family subsidies and the child care facilities fund. That allocation has since become an ongoing source of funds for those two items, and in FY 1999 the council voted another $2 million to improve child care quality.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- At the first meeting of the **Rhode Island** Early Childhood Panel, local child care providers, families and public school educators told poignant stories to illustrate the desperate shortage of child care in Central Falls. Kids Count staff accompanied the stories with a fact sheet on the status of child care in that community, showing in stark detail the disparity between, for example, the number of poor children aged three to five and the number of subsidized slots for the same group. Presenting recent data for that population at that meeting helped deliver a powerful message about the need for action. As Elizabeth Burke Bryant said, "No one had to use anecdotes or conjecture—they had the facts."

- **Boston's** Parents United for Child Care combined local and national data, along with statistics and stories, to advocate for its proposed Affordable Child Care for Everyone Bill. In addition, one of the bill's main provisions requires the state to collect additional data on the supply of and demand for child care.

CREATING MULTI-MEDIA CAMPAIGNS THAT CAPTURE THE PUBLIC'S ATTENTION

Just as producers of commercials combine appealing images with hard facts, so too are child advocates using an increasing array of media and strategies to capture the public's attention. Advocates have learned that they need a variety of colorful, attractive approaches that reach the target audience—from legislators to families—in a variety of ways. The best of these effectively combine hard statistics with stories or vignettes that put a human face on the problem at hand. They have also learned about the power of public information campaigns not only to turn the spotlight on the issues, but also to reward allies and strengthen their support.

- **Rhode Island** Kids Count has a monthly cable TV show that was started when the congregation of a local synagogue did not need all the air time allotted to its show, and offered the time to Kids Count. Kids Count uses the show to build public support and key relationships by highlighting both important issues and the often unsung heroes and legislators behind those issues. In addition, the Rhode Island Department of Health spearheaded a successful public engagement campaign on the dangers of lead poisoning, which included public awareness spots, bus billboards, and a provocative and beautiful series of posters arrayed around the state.

- **Vermont's** Agency for Human Services and Department of Education's joint reports on the status of children and families highlight dramatic improvements in the rates of child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy and other key indicators, along with the stories behind the statistics. The

numbers deliver an irrefutable message, while the stories make the numbers come alive.

- **West Virginia** has shown what a state can do with relatively limited resources but great stores of creativity. The Governor's Cabinet on Children and Families has produced a video and print materials on its Starting Points Family Resource Centers that combine family stories with quantitative data from each center. They have created a variety of toolkits that even the smallest communities can use to publicize the importance of the early years. Their focus on reaching people in every corner of the state led them to create a website that not only provides information to the public but is also a vehicle for cross-agency collaboration, since it is jointly supported by the state office of maternal and child health, departments of social services and of education, Head Start, and the Governor's Cabinet on Children and Families.
- **Pittsburgh's** Community Voices initiative turns the spotlight on parent leaders who tell their stories to legislators, along with facts on family support. Pittsburgh Starting Points director Bob Nelkin credits this combination approach with reversing a new county council's intention of dramatically reducing funding for their Family Support Centers. Based on parent stories and hard data, the county council has increased funding for the centers by 31 percent while reducing the overall county budget.

USING COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS TO DEMONSTRATE THE VALUE OF INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Some initiative leaders are making effective use of private-sector techniques, doing cost-benefit analyses of and documenting the return on investment from investments in early childhood supports. While the data generated out of these types of analyses can

Learning From Starting Points: Using Data and Information Technologies for Advocacy

- Both researchers and advocates need to ensure that data are viewed as objective and reliable.
- Academic researchers need encouragement to apply their talents to policy analyses that help public officials make more informed decisions.
- Advocates can be especially effective if they provide not only regular data reports but also special analyses that can inform breaking developments.
- The more pointed the data, the sharper it can cut. Advocates need to avoid "the blame game" when using data to highlight issues or performance. Rather, they will be most effective if they use data as a means to pursue a joint mission of improving supports for children.
- Both the message and the messenger are important and need to fit the situation.
- As with the private sector, the most effective advocacy campaigns use a variety of media to capture the attention of their target audience.
- Certain data techniques, such as cost-benefit analysis and return-on-investment analysis, are still being developed; advocates need to be careful about making strong claims based on new methods and still-emerging data.

make a powerful case, especially when addressing business leaders, they must also be used with caution since the methodology is still in a developmental stage. The risk is that decisionmakers may rush to judgment about the relative efficacy of different investments, using data to make more definitive decisions than they can actually support.

A second issue is the need to balance expectations among different audiences. Politicians and businesspeople are beginning to expect some numbers—any numbers—even when available research tools may be inadequate. At the same time, the academic advisors or consultants to whom the initiatives may turn for advice, insist on using more sophisticated data or methods than the programs can support or use.

A third issue is the choice sites must often make between producing one expensive report, with rigorous data analyses that they cannot afford to replicate; or reports that use sophisticated methods but can be readily updated. Pittsburgh has opted for the latter course, choosing a data collection and reporting method that they can update every few years.

A fourth issue is the need to not only prepare a sound analysis, but to write and market it in ways that reach the intended audiences.

- In 1996, **Pittsburgh** early childhood leaders commissioned a comprehensive return-on-investment analysis on supports and services in disadvantaged neighborhoods. They are updating the analysis in 2000, and are incorporating a variety of improvements. The new analysis will have business sponsorship and be written by business consultants, to incorporate methods and language familiar to business leaders. They will also develop a marketing plan and convene a group of business and civic leaders to convey the results to public officials. And, in debating whether to undertake a comprehensive new analysis that they could repeat only every five years or so, they opted for a simpler approach that could be updated every one to two years.

- **Baltimore** is in the process of concluding a cost-benefit analysis of its Healthy Start Initiative, looking primarily at the short-term cost savings associated with reductions in the number of infants with very low birthweights. Preliminary results look promising; however, the process of completing such an analysis has been lengthy, in part due to the rigor of the overall local Healthy Start evaluation. Policymakers are eagerly awaiting its release, since this will be one of the first analyses of this kind conducted on a social service program in Baltimore.
- **Rhode Island** Kids Count has developed an initial issue brief on national cost-benefit analyses of early childhood programs, which has been a useful ice-breaker with the business community. As Elizabeth Burke Bryant points out about the sophistication of the analysis, "We don't have all the sophisticated, longitudinal studies that we all want. But that shouldn't stop us from presenting what data we do have. Common sense data, thoughtfully presented, can make our points and we shouldn't apologize for it."

3. Managing for Better Results

Like business leaders, early childhood leaders are also using new data and information technologies to better manage complex initiatives aimed at improving results for children, families and communities. These technologies can help strengthen and encourage work-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ers and volunteers, especially those at the front line; and they can help develop a culture of accountability that supports continuous improvement.

FOCUSING ON RESULTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

One of the most powerful trends sweeping through the human service field is the use of results-based decisionmaking—improving the planning, budgeting, and managerial aspects of programs, while holding them accountable for their impact on children and families. Early childhood initiatives are focusing on how to incorporate these concepts into their work, and how appropriately to measure progress among very young children. Key to success here is the concept of shared accountability—while it is important to focus on results, responsibility for producing results should be shared among partners, and between senior level and front-line workers.

Specific sites are pushing ahead in results-based decisionmaking in a variety of ways.

- **Vermont** has pioneered the use of outcomes to change policies and programs. Beginning in 1993, the state Agency for Human Services and the Department of Education published an annual report on Vermont's progress on selected social well-being indicators. In 1995, the Agency for Human Services, led by Con Hogan, began publishing indicator data at the school district level. State and local leaders in Vermont have used those reports to inculcate a "culture of prevention" in state programs aimed at improving results. And indeed many of those indicators (such as rates of child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy and infant mortality) have improved significantly in recent years. Con Hogan and others attribute this trend to a consistent focus on informing local residents about the status of their communities; identifying the supports and services that can improve those numbers; and aligning resources to fund those supports and services.
- In **North Carolina**, Smart Start staff, working with the Frank Porter Graham Center at UNC-Chapel Hill, have developed a series of assessments to measure the impact of Smart Start services on children. They now have data showing that children in Smart Start are showing up for kindergarten with higher school readiness skills than some of their peers who were not in Smart Start programs. Ashley Thrift, who chairs the North Carolina Partnership for Children, notes that in legislative battles over Smart Start funding, "every time opponents argued against Smart Start, its supporters could counter with results."
- In **San Francisco**, the Mayor's Office for Children, Youth and Their Families uses a logic model with its grantees, to show the results it seeks, how specific grantee projects fit into those results, and how the project staff will track their progress.

- **Hawaii** has developed a set of state-level indicators, and child advocacy organizations are using those indicators to show how their work fits into the state goals. Hawaii Starting Points is also pioneering a sophisticated analysis of its community building and systems change strategies, using evaluation techniques to quantify the growth of community leaders and the institution of policy changes.
- The **Baltimore** City Healthy Start program developed a pregnancy outcome evaluation conducted by Johns Hopkins University and a sophisticated automated Client Tracking System that is able to generate client-specific and program management reports. These will help guide the Healthy Start program in two neighborhoods of Baltimore over an eight-year period. These tools are also being used to help shape the service delivery model for a city-wide family support initiative focused on families with children from birth through age six, which is being implemented initially in seven communities.
- In **Rhode Island**, the Governor's office, in partnership with the Children's Cabinet, took the lead in developing three state-wide outcomes for the children of Rhode Island. These outcomes have become the organizing framework for the state's efforts to improve the lives of children.

CONNECTING AND EMPOWERING PEOPLE AT THE FRONT LINE

An essential part of many early childhood initiatives is strengthening people who advocate for and work with families, whether they are community volunteers, agency staff or others. Initiative leaders are making data available to communities in ways that allow local residents to understand what's happening in their communities and prepare their own assessments of the situation.

Giving everyone the same data can spark discussions based on a common understanding of the

community's situation. Yet leaders need to address several major issues as they make data available to communities.

First is the need to ensure that data are used constructively, as tools for community members and front-line staff to pursue their mutual interest in improving service delivery, rather than simply as a vehicle to blame organizations or individuals. As part of this approach, officials need to take the time to alert people—such as agency staff or elected officials—before releasing data that show poor results for their program or community. They also need to structure conversations around the data that contribute to this joint problem-solving atmosphere.

A second issue is protecting confidentiality when the numbers are small (Vermont uses rolling three-year averages to boost the numbers), or to prevent misrepresentation when the tracked outcome is a rare event, such as infant mortality at the neighborhood level (Baltimore also uses multi-year data analysis to address this problem).

A third issue is building the capacity of local residents to manipulate and interpret the data correctly. Vermont trains people regularly, since new players come into the process on a regular basis.

Leaders are also building information networks (mainly listserves and intranet sites) that connect people—field staff, family child care providers and others—who might otherwise be isolated from each other. This helps them share ideas, explore options for their community, and give each other moral support. Yet,

their power to allow people to speak their mind to all listeners is a two-edged sword. Leaders need to help users strike a balance between frank conversation and one that can offend or alienate potential supporters. They also need to balance membership requirements —keeping the group limited so that conversation is targeted to the subject matter but large enough to allow some freedom of expression.

- **Vermont** has led the nation in making data available to communities. It makes Agency of Human Services and Department of Education data at the township level available on the internet. Local residents can access the data for their township and develop their own analyses. Vermont's Cheryl Mitchell observes that the data provide an objective platform for residents to use in asking questions of public officials in Vermont's frequent town meetings. She adds that making the same data available to everyone reduces debates about which town is in the worst (or best) situation. The governor, elected officials and senior agency officials also use the local data to write personalized letters to communities, congratulating them on their hard work to achieve good results.

  Listserves can also be used to distribute information. Vermont's Early Childhood Councils (which link community child care providers) have developed a listserve for their members that reflects their state's unique character. It is used to distribute birth announcements as well as policy changes, keeping people connected on a personal as well as official level.

- **Florida** publishes county-by-county compilations of data on the availability of child care. The Florida Children's Campaign has developed "door hangers" for three counties that give both statewide and county-specific information on child care. They have distributed thousands of these door hangers because they believe this information enables community members to have more specific, better-informed conversations with public officials on the status of children and strategies to improve it.

USING DISTANCE LEARNING TO SPREAD THE WORD AND BRIDGE THE GAP

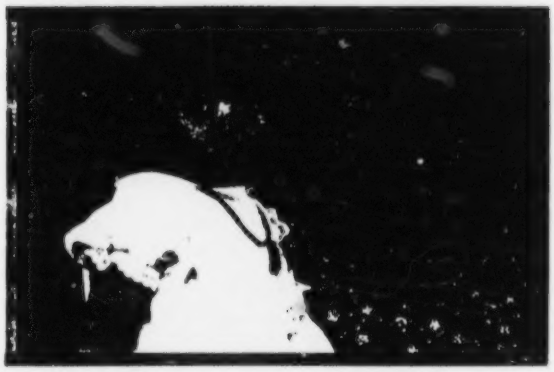
Increasing skills, especially among lower-income or isolated child care providers, is key to improving the quality of early education and care. One of the great promises of information technology is that it can increase access to skills and training among rural, isolated or just busy people. Several national initiatives provide general training or specific certifications to early childhood providers using the internet or broadcast technology. One of the major issues for these initiatives is ensuring that the people most in need of the training know about these opportunities

and have access to the equipment and information needed to take advantage of them.

- The **National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies** (NACCRRA) has developed "Learning Options" which offers a completely online program to obtain a associate's degree in early childhood education. The system offers an internet version of the fully-accredited AAS degree from Jefferson Community College in Kentucky.
- The **HeadsUp! Network** uses direct broadcast satellite television to provide training seminars to early childhood educators, especially Head Start providers. Topics include health and safety, hiring and recruiting, and creating developmentally appropriate programs. The Network is a partnership between the National Head Start Association and organizations in the satellite broadcast industry.
- The **Ohio** Ready to Learn partnership has worked with the Public Broadcasting Service to develop and deliver high-quality programming for young children, as well as workshops aimed at child care providers. Child care organizations and agencies in **Montana** have formed a partnership with Montana Public Television to broadcast similar programming. Viewers can simply watch the shows or complete assignments to get college credit. This method has been especially effective at reaching providers in informal and unlicensed care, since public television can reach those who do not have access to the internet or cable televisions.

CREATING AND USING COST ACCOUNTING/DECISION SUPPORT SOFTWARE

While businesses have long used accounting methods and software to track costs, revenues, products and profits, human service programs have not generally had access to comparable information. And yet technologies that would allow human service initiatives



to track the costs of providing services, sources of revenue, the amount of service provided and the results of that service would have a profound impact on their ability to manage resources effectively.

A major caution is that comparisons of "cost per outcome" across different programs, providers or geographic areas can be misused and should be done with care. There are many very legitimate reasons why one program may spend more to achieve a similar outcome. Local leaders may want to use initial information for internal management purposes, to look for success stories and help less successful programs improve, before using it for external reporting and more direct consequences.

- The Local Investment Commission (LINC) in **Kansas City, Missouri**, has pioneered the use of technology to improve management. LINC staff use a customized software program to collect data for a variety of child- and family-serving programs on finances (expenditures and revenues), services and outcomes. Each expenditure has a detailed accounting code that specifies the funding source, contract, site, type of service, type of product and outcome associated with that expenditure. Staff can use the data to determine where the bulk of costs occur, the relative costs of different services or services provided to different populations, and which expenditures are associated with different outcomes.

- In **Baltimore**, the cost-benefit analysis now underway uses program "cost centers" to calculate the costs of various services to pregnant and post-partum women and their infants. Those program costs that are clearly associated with improving pregnancy outcomes and generating short-term savings can be segregated from other program costs not related to these short-term savings (e.g., employment readiness and job placement program costs).
- The **North Carolina** Partnership for Children is developing a data tracking system that will enable it to compare expenditures, services and outcomes across the different Smart Start sites. Considerable energy went into developing definitions and defining categories of services to ensure that "apples were compared to apples" when the analysis was done.

USING INTERMEDIARIES TO IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION AND STREAMLINE ADMINISTRATION

A comprehensive early childhood initiative can start as a centralized policy or program that is disseminated throughout the state, or it can form as disparate individual programs combine their efforts. In either case, many initiatives are developing intermediary organizations that can help compile data across local program sites and aggregate them to make a more powerful statement about their impact on children and families. (These intermediaries can also provide other services, such as training, administrative support and access to group health insurance.)

One lesson is that unless their roles and value are clearly communicated at the outset, these intermediaries can also be perceived as another layer of bureaucracy. Early childhood leaders often need to demonstrate the value that these entities bring to the local partners of a comprehensive initiative. Most often that value comes from the fact that these intermediaries have the expertise, resources and time

to devote to data collection and analysis, while programs or sites focus more on service delivery. These intermediaries work best when they seek input from and work collaboratively with early childhood programs in setting up mechanisms for collecting data, and in understanding how to present the data so that providers as well as policymakers find the information useful.

- The **North Carolina** Partnership for Children (NCPC), the intermediary for Smart Start, has created an intranet site ("Smart.net") that director Karen Ponder calls "the single most valuable tool we could have to improve communications and streamline administrative tasks." The Partnership uses the site to distribute, log and archive a wide variety of materials for local grantees, including announcements, instructions, and requirements. Local grantees who want a copy of a previous memo or other document can look it up on the site, instead of asking the NCPC staff to track it down and re-send it. This saves time for both the local and state partners. The site also links far-flung providers, keeping them in touch with each other as well as with the central office.

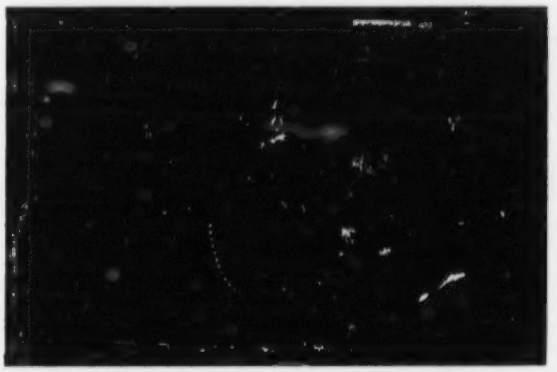
  NCPC is also developing an on-line reporting system for Smart Start sites, using a wide area network (WAN). Through this network, NCPC and its research partner, the Frank Porter Graham Center, will make available data compiled across sites. Sites will use the network to report their

expenditure, service and outcome data via the internet, thereby facilitating both data input and analysis. Both local staff and the central office will have faster access to data on the status of children and families, and will be better equipped to respond to policymakers' questions. NCPC will also be able to answer questions about a particular site's status without having to ask the site to gather the data.

- Two years ago, **Pittsburgh's** Family Support Policy Board, supported by the Heinz Foundation and others, realized it needed to bring the county's family resource centers together to ask them to define common performance measures and collect common data in order to show their combined impact. The centers agreed. The Board developed, and centers are now using, a common child development scale and a management information system to collect and compile data across the centers. The Board is now able to produce a joint report, showing the centers' combined impact on children as measured by the new child development scale. This report has greatly strengthened their case for state and local support.
- In **West Virginia**, the Governor's Cabinet on Children and Families developed a common data report form for Starting Points Family Resource Centers, trained staff on its use and supported the acquisition of necessary hardware and software. Cabinet staff can now compile service data across all of the centers; they expect to move soon to compiling results data as well. This helps build the case for support of the centers across the state.

SHARING DATA AMONG AGENCIES

Human service reformers have worked for years to improve the ability of public agencies to share their data, and these efforts are starting to bear fruit. While the risks and obstacles are well known—confidentiality issues, compatibility problems, etc.—over time, some sites have begun to dispel the notion that such hurdles cannot be scaled. The establishment of "data warehouses" that hold vast quantities of data across a number of systems has enabled some agencies to understand how people fare over time in their experiences across the systems that are meant to help them. Related to this development is the increasing use of common intake and assessment forms and procedures that allow people access to a number of services through one portal.



Successful ventures to develop joint databases have several elements in common. They took shape over years of careful negotiation that included strict confidentiality protections. The data managers have convinced legislators that the data will not be misused, and they have ensured that the information generated is of value to policymakers. Experience in Florida and elsewhere suggests that databases built for policy purposes are often underused by academic researchers, who could greatly assist policymakers with rigorous analyses of the data. At the same time, academic databases are sometimes little known to policy staff or even staff in other academic departments who would find the data useful.

- The state of **Florida** maintains one of the largest perinatal data warehouses in the country, collecting and maintaining data on children born in Florida—it includes over 100 variables from four state agencies (using social security numbers and

Medicaid numbers as unique identifiers). It includes vital statistics data as well as socio-demographic information, use of some public programs (such as Women, Infants and Children nutrition programs), pre- and post-natal screening data for Healthy Start, preschool experience, and some educational achievement data (retention in grade, suspensions, and state educational assessment test scores). Eventually their data could be linked to other databases, such as those containing information on high school graduates' post-school experiences, or criminal justice system data. According to Mary Bryant at the Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center for Healthy Mothers and Babies, child advocates used data from this warehouse as part of the successful campaign to obtain a ten-fold expansion of the state's pre-kindergarten system.

- The **Baltimore** City Healthy Start program maintains three separate databases: the Healthy Start Program Client Tracking System, Baltimore

Learning From Starting Points: Using Data and Information Technology to Improve Supports and Services

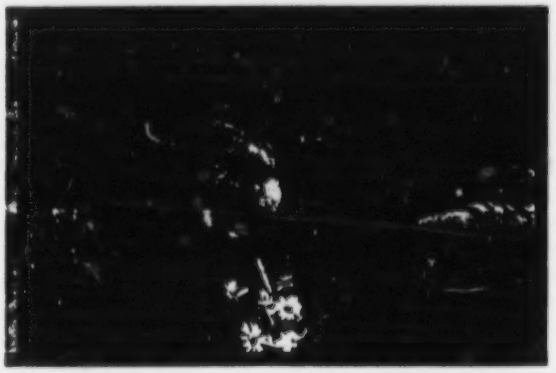
- Giving communities data on the status of their own children and families can generate significant energy for change. But when preparing to release data at the local level, for use by community members, agencies need to protect confidentiality and constantly train community members in how to use and interpret the data correctly. They also need to ensure that data are used constructively, rather than to find fault.
- E-mail and listserves have an enormous potential for building connections in the field, but they are still evolving forms of communication, and there is a need for new rules and customs governing their use.
- One of the most important functions of new information technologies is to provide timely feedback on the status of children and families and the performance of programs that serve them. But this too is an emerging field, with the need for careful planning about the use of these data to make decisions about how to constantly improve without unfairly penalizing those who are giving their best efforts. Key here is the concept of "shared accountability"—sharing responsibility for results among partners, and between senior and front-line workers.
- New information technologies can be especially helpful in bringing opportunities to rural, isolated or just busy providers, allowing them to use distance learning to build their skills. However, they need the hardware and training to use it.
- A key tool in better decisionmaking is the development of accounting systems that can track four sets of information—revenues, costs, activities and results—in order to have a complete picture of the most effective interventions for children and families.
- Intermediaries can often play an essential role in centralizing data collection efforts while supporting front-line service providers.
- Key to knowing how to improve supports for children and families is the ability to integrate databases to track their status over time. While advocates have made some inroads here, they need to continue to reassure lawmakers about confidentiality issues and help funders view information technology as integral to quality service delivery.

City birth certificates, and data from the Maryland Prenatal Risk Assessment Form which is completed by prenatal care providers. These databases can be linked as needed to generate reports or to support various analyses. Additionally, Healthy Start enjoys access to the Baltimore Immunization Registry for immunization data on its clients.

- **Vermont's** Geographic Information System documents, in considerable detail, the demand for and capacity of services by geographic area in the state. It has been a tremendous help in pinpointing the need for additional services, such as rental housing for lower-income families in one part of the state. State agencies have also partnered in developing a single client application for state services, which, as Cheryl Mitchell points out, not only helps families but also gives a practical objective that can start the challenging process of collaboration.
- **Rhode Island** Kids Count has obtained generous cooperation from state agencies in developing Kids Count reports that inform the policy debate. Rhode Island's success was built on careful cultivation of relationships. One important decision was for each department to assign both a data person and a policy person to work with Kids Count. One helped find the data, the other helped interpret and present the data. It also helped to realize that there were many staff people in the state agencies who had dedicated their careers to collecting good data, but whose data had never been used to its full potential. Finding those people, and tapping into their desire to see their work recognized, unleashed a tremendous amount of energy and boosted morale among agency staff.

4. Looking Ahead

While early childhood initiative leaders have made long strides in the strategic use of data, they see a variety of challenges and opportunities for the future.



- **Moving to results-based decisionmaking:** Policymakers and the public are increasing their demand to critically examine what public and private efforts are accomplishing for children and families, and to know how the performance of a state or locality compares with other places or with its own performance over time. States and communities want performance data to feed into strategic planning at the state and local level, to influence the allocation of resources, and to improve the implementation of desired strategies. Front-line providers want rapid feedback on how their efforts are affecting children and families. Virtually every state has some form of performance management initiative underway in state agencies; many also have other reform initiatives that challenge communities to take more responsibility for local changes. In addition, many early childhood leaders may follow Vermont and North Carolina's lead by developing data collection systems that rapidly turn around analyses for local residents and providers. The success of these initiatives will depend both on what data can be collected, and on how it is used to motivate ever-improving performance. Designing and administering these systems fairly and effectively will be one of the great challenges facing both public and private efforts to improve the lives of children and families.
- **Networking and managing information across the early childhood community:** The increase in interest in early childhood means

a rapidly expanding knowledge base, a growing peer network, and access to an extensive community of people with diverse expertise. The challenge is to see that each segment of this community has access to the widest possible knowledge base and that important lessons are shared with the broadest possible audience. People are so busy that it is often hard to find time to skim the voluminous amounts of material that arrive in their in-box every day or track down every good suggestion or contact. They cannot travel to every meeting or conference. Electronic means of communication can address these concerns by providing easy ways to find good ideas and experienced people—sorted by whatever factors are most important at that moment. There is a need for a system to organize all of this information, to provide the widest access with the most efficient use of time, and to ensure that all of the data collection efforts move towards better information, not just more information.

- **Infrastructure issues:** The advent of results-based decisionmaking requires significant changes in the way data are collected and processed. In order to make better decisions, agencies, like businesses, will need both hardware and software that can collect and connect information on revenues, costs, activities and results; provide timely performance reports; enable communities to access and use the data; and inform decisions on policies and programs. This will require ever more sophisticated communications with lawmakers to resolve their concerns and change their perspective on the value of data and IT.
- **Privacy:** Alleviating concerns about invasions of privacy and misuse of data is key to building legislative and public support. For example, in Baltimore, Healthy Start and the Safe and Sound Campaign (the umbrella organization overseeing the development and roll-out of the citywide family support initiative) are exploring how to effectively track families across several service systems. They are particularly examining the City Health Department's Maternal and Infant Nursing Program and the case management services of the seven communities participating in the family support strategy. Discussions of the development of this system are focused on issues of confidentiality, two-way referral, and the best fit between a family's needs and the service options (e.g., a pregnant woman with medical complications might be best served by a public health nurse whereas a family with primarily social needs could be served by a community-based program).
- **Demand for data:** Both national and local experts have called for the development of nationwide indicators that are consistent across states. Mark Friedman observes an eagerness in the field for child and family statistics that are as definitive and breathlessly anticipated as the monthly labor statistics report. In particular, many Starting Points sites have been grappling with the establishment of school readiness indicators, in the absence of defined indicators at a national level. There needs to be some consensus on indicators, so that state and local measures for early care and education can become as established and accepted as those in public health (e.g., rates of infant mortality, low-birthweight, and childhood immunizations).

Resources for More Information

- Bruner, Charlie with Stephen Scott and Martha Steketee. *Allegheny County Study: Potential Returns on Investment from a Comprehensive Family Center Approach in High Risk Neighborhoods*. Des Moines, IA: Child and Family Policy Center, 1995.
- Harrington, Robert and Peter Jenkins with Caroly Marzke and Carol Cohen. *Developing Cost*

AVAILABLE

Accounting and Decision Support Software for Comprehensive Community-Based Support Systems. Washington, DC: The Finance Project, 1999.

- Hawaii Kids Watch, *Children's Budget Analysis Data Book*. Honolulu, HI: Author, 1999.
- Hogan, Cornelius and David Murphey, *Toward an Economics of Prevention: Illustrations from Vermont's Experience*. Washington, DC: The Finance Project, 2000 (forthcoming).
- Karoly, Lynn, Peter Greenwood, Susan Everingham, Jill Hoube, M. Rebecca Kilburn, C. Peter Rydell, Matthew Sanders, and James Chiesa, *Investing In Our Children*. Palo Alto, CA: RAND, 1999.
- National Governors' Association, *Indicators of Family and Child Well Being*, Washington, D.C., 1998.
- Rhode Island Kids Count, *Cost-Benefit of Early Childhood Programs*. Providence, RI: Author, 1999.
- Sazer O'Donnell, Nina and Ellen Galinsky, *Measuring Progress and Results in Early Childhood System Development*, New York: Families and Work Institute, 1998.
- Vermont Agency of Human Services and Department of Education, *The Social Well-Being of Vermonters*. Waterbury, VT: Author, 1999.
- Watson, Sara, *Using Results to Improve the Lives of Children and Families: A Guide for Public-Private Child Care Partnerships*. Washington, D.C.: The Finance Project, 2000.

WEBSITES:

(The websites below can be an effective initial source of information on the innovations mentioned in this brief.)

- Florida: **www.chilescenter.org**, **www.floridakids.com**
- Hawaii: **www.goodbeginnings.org**
- North Carolina: **www.smartstart-nc.org**
- Pittsburgh: **www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb**
- Rhode Island: **www.rikidscount.org**
- Vermont: **www.ahs.state.vt.us**
- West Virginia: **www.citynet.net/wvfamilies**
- The Finance Project: **www.financeproject.org**
- Local Investment Commission (Kansas City, MO): **www.kclinc.org**
- Learning Options (NACCRRA's associate's degree program): **www.learningoptions.org**

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank those whose work and input contributed to this brief: Mary Bryant, Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Elisabeth Chun, Elise DeWinter, Christine Ferguson, Susan Geissler, Cheryl Mitchell, Robert Nelkin, Karen Ponder, Carol Stevenson, Kim Veraas, Michael Levine, Susan Smith, Cheryl Hayes, Judith Jones, Jane Knitzer, Ellen Galinsky, Nina Sazer O'Donnell, Rima Shore and Mairead Reidy. Design and illustration by Rings Leighton Design Group.

© Copyright 2000 by Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Finance Project.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Starting Points

This brief was created as part of **Carnegie Corporation of New York's Starting Points State and Community Partnerships for Young Children**. Starting Points was established to plan and implement the reforms described in the Corporation's task force report, *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*. The four goals of the initiative are promoting responsible parenthood, ensuring high quality child care, providing children with good health and protection, and mobilizing the public to support young children and families. Starting Points sites are Baltimore, Boston, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Vermont and West Virginia. National partners include The Finance Project **(www.financeproject.org)**, Columbia University School of Public Health **(www.columbia.edu)**, the National Center for Children in Poverty **(www.nccp.org)**, and the Families and Work Institute **(www.familiesandwork.org)**. More information about Carnegie Corporation can be found at www.carnegie.org.

The Finance Project

The Finance Project is a non-profit policy research, technical assistance and information organization that was created to help improve outcomes for children, families and communities nationwide. Its mission is to support decisionmaking that produces and sustains good results for children, families and communities by developing and disseminating information, knowledge, tools and technical assistance for improved policies, programs and financing strategies. Since its inception in 1994, The Finance Project has become an unparalleled resource on issues and strategies related to the financing of education and other supports and services for children, families and community development. For more information, visit TFP's website at **www.financeproject.org**.

The **FINANCE** PROJECT

1000 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 628-4200 phone
(202) 628-4205 fax
www.financeproject.org

BEST COPY AVAILABLE